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Washington, DC -- President Clinton today approved a request by Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary Jesse Brown to extend the eligibility period for compensation for Persian Gulf War veterans with undiagnosed illnesses. Brown recommended that VA extend through Dec. 31, 2001, the period in which Gulf War veterans' undiagnosed illnesses must become manifest in order to be presumed related to their service in the Gulf and thus qualify them for VA compensation benefits.

"Gulf War veterans who fell ill as a result of service to their country should receive the compensation they earned, even if science cannot yet pinpoint the cause of their illnesses," President Clinton said. "I will not stop until we have done everything in our power to provide the care and find the answers our Gulf War veterans so badly need and deserve."

Secretary Brown added, "Gulf War veterans served honorably, and some are now suffering. It will take time for us to find all the answers, but until we do, we must provide them with the disability compensation they deserve. In recent days, I have met with Gulf War veterans across the country who contributed to the decision to extend the presumptive period through 2001. Their message was clear: 'All we are asking is that you not forget us, that you help us and our families.' This decision, as well as our continuing research and medical treatment efforts, reflect our commitment to doing just that," Brown said.

Of the 84,000 veterans claiming a disability related to Gulf service, about 65,000 have already been approved by VA under conventional criteria. Only 660 have been service-connected to date under the undiagnosed-illness regulation, but thousands of new claimants may become eligible as a result of the change in compensation regulations. After the regulation becomes final, approximately 5,000 claims that were denied because they did not meet the current two-year presumptive period will be readjudicated.

Where an illness or injury is shown by service medical records or other evidentiary standards to have occurred before discharge, a veteran of any war or peacetime era of service can be service-connected and compensated based on the degree of disability. Persian Gulf War veterans have the additional benefit covering undiagnosed illnesses. There is no general requirement under VA regulations that a Persian Gulf veteran prove a particular exposure or cause-and-effect. The current regulation generally provides for compensation on the basis of symptoms alone, provided they have persisted for at least six months, cannot be attributed to a diagnosable medical condition, and become at least 10 percent disabling not later than two years after the veteran left the Gulf. With this change, an undiagnosed illness that appears at any time before Dec. 31, 2001, now will be presumed to be related to service in the Persian Gulf.

The year 2001 extension will not go into effect until implementing regulations are adopted and published in the Federal Register, which is expected later this year. VA will take public comment during the period before the regulations are final and may further adjust the benefit provisions.

Gulf War veterans currently have access to VA medical care which includes comprehensive health examinations, followup care and treatment, excluding only those whose illnesses are determined not to be attributable to Gulf service.

Veterans who are in need of medical care, who wish to take advantage of the protocol physical examination under the Persian Gulf Registry, or who have general questions about the Persian Gulf experience, environmental factors, or VA medical policies, may receive information from their local VA medical center

or the Persian Gulf Information Helpline at 1-800-PGW-VETS (1-800-749-8387).

Approximately 63,700 Persian Gulf veterans already have received the Registry health examination, but not all are symptomatic; healthy, concerned veterans are encouraged to participate in the health exam program as well.

Active-duty servicemembers who were deployed to the Gulf War may receive a protocol health examination through military treatment facilities by calling 1-800-796-9699.